

AN AIRLINE PILOT THINKS ALOUD

*Making the
Sky Safe for
Democracy*

By CHARON

THE incredible apathy of the Air Ministry concerning civil air transport in this country is not only distressing but dangerous to an extent only appreciated by pilots of transport machines. The recently published Maybury Report was a step in the right direction, but there was nothing contained therein that had not been known for years by every internal airline pilot.

It seems to me that constructive criticism is badly needed. At the present moment one has only to undergo the alarming experience of flying in QBI conditions to realise what a nasty mess there is going to be at Manchester (or Liverpool), the centre of the Maybury plan, if things are allowed to remain as they are.

Before any new regulations concerning air line operation are put into force in this country it would be as well to obtain a consensus of opinion from the pilots who will have to obey them. At present too much is left to theory. The G.A.P.A.N. seems to be the obvious body to undertake the collection of this practical opinion, and a number of obvious problems would immediately present themselves for discussion.

Let me deal first with the problem of aerodrome design. Obviously it would be impossible to make every aerodrome in the country the same shape, but it *should* be feasible to limit the licensing of commercial aerodromes so that no transport machine would ever be faced with a take-off run of less than 800 yds. There are several aerodromes now being used for passenger traffic where neither take-offs nor landings are safe on the shorter runs unless a gale is blowing in the required direction.

Pilots are now expected to take-off in fog, but how many airports in this country have the necessary white line to assist them? From what height can dingy red obstruction flags be seen? How many pilots have the opportunity of practising with short-wave approach equipment?

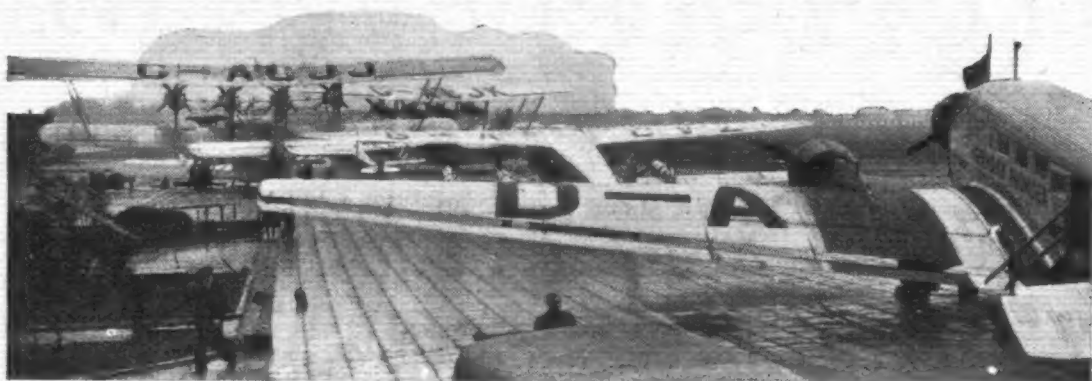
Traffic Control

Then there is the business of traffic control. Last summer a pilot had the misfortune to approach one airport under QBI conditions with a load of passengers when six other machines had the same objective. Visibility was given as 500 yds. and sundown was due in ten minutes. Of the seven machines, three were under radio control, while the others lacked the necessary equipment, and their movements remained unknown until the last radio-controlled machine was about to land. Then they all appeared simultaneously. Morbid spectators lined the tarmac as five aeroplanes flew round in various directions, occasionally touching down and taking off again as the fence or buildings loomed up ahead. No one was hurt.

There was not the slightest excuse for the four pilots who, presumably without imagination, entered the controlled zone without wireless; the fog area was purely local. At all events the four culprits were not thrown into jail, either because control officers are not given enough authority or because this one was too kindhearted. Those same pilots are free to do exactly the same thing again, and not until a major collision takes place over an airport will anything be done.

The Air Ministry could learn a lot from the methods of Trinity House. There are few accidents on the Thames. Why must it be necessary for a lot of people to be killed in collisions before those in authority appreciate that a control officer has a tremendous responsibility and should at least be given the powers accorded to a policeman on point duty?

Again, there should be a qualified Met. Officer at every airport. Too often do pilots receive misleading (to use a very mild word) weather reports from the radio operator or traffic clerk at their destination. Not so long ago a machine left one aerodrome for another about 80 miles away, the clouds at which were described as having a base at 800 ft. On arrival,



the pilot found that a height of 350 ft. was registered on his sensitive altimeter, which was proved to be correctly set. It transpired that the cloud-base had lowered during the flight, but no one had bothered to inform him. The control officer had made his guess at the weather that morning and it was cold out of doors. Once, too, an unauthorised person took it upon himself to issue a weather report. The pilot to whom he spoke took off in blind conditions, and subsequently killed himself and his passengers. An unqualified doctor's assistant would be flung into jail for making out a prescription on his own.

A solution to this sort of problem would be the provision of a Met. Officer, who would send weather reports to the control officer every hour and on every occasion on which the weather had deteriorated since the last report. The latter should be sent automatically to any machine on its way.

Radio Complications

Of all the aids to flying, wireless threatens to become the most complicated. So much so that even now the use of it frequently defeats its own object. It is high time that the whole situation was cleared up, and here it would do the Air Ministry no harm to enquire into the conditions prevailing in countries where civil aviation is more advanced. Their problems may not be the same as our own, but a compromise might be worked out to suit our own needs.

First of all let radio-telephony be scrapped. Its range is very limited and it is useless when in competition with W/T. Used only for the broadcasting of weather reports it would be very successful.

Two-way communication should be limited to normal traffic messages in which aircraft report height, position, course, speed, estimated time of arrival, and so on, with only such messages as would assist control officers in organising traffic. Every airport should be equipped with an automatic beacon transmitting a call sign at intervals, followed by a long dash. Every passenger-carrying aircraft should carry a radio operator and be equipped with the necessary homing device.

In this way each class of transmission could be allotted a separate waveband, and the ever-increasing menace of interference would be limited. There is no more unpleasant feeling in the world than that experienced during a take-off in fog while trusting to R/T and then to be left hanging in the sky receiving no attention because of interference.

There are a number of commercial airports at which private and school flying is allowed to take place in QBI conditions. The definition of QBI is clear enough, but too often one can see school machines circling an aerodrome in a cloudless sky but in visibility of less than a mile. The risk of collision in such hazy conditions, often aggravated by approaching sunset, is enormous. By all means let private flying continue under the most atrocious conditions, but it must be limited to places not used normally by passenger-carrying machines. Only last summer an airline machine had its aerial shorn off by a Puss Moth as it left the vicinity of its airport in hazy conditions. An infringement of flying regulations should be considered a crime punishable in the civil courts and should be reported by the control officer concerned.

Machines are far too often allowed to take off in bad weather conditions when it is known to the control officer that other machines are making for the aerodrome concerned. There is a definite time-lag between the last transmission of the approaching machine and the first transmission of another which is just taking off. The machine on the ground should not in this case be allowed to leave the tarmac until the other has landed.